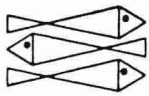
THE PROFESSOR OF DESIRE

PHILIP ROTH



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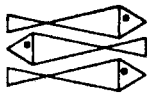

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NEW YORK

BOOKS BY PHILIP ROTH

Goodbye, Columbus
Letting Go
When She Was Good
Portnoy's Complaint
Our Gang
The Breast
The Great American Novel
My Life as a Man
Reading Myself and Others
The Professor of Desire

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For Claire Bloom

THE PROFESSOR OF DESIRE

Temptation comes to me first in the conspicuous personage of Herbie Bratasky, social director, bandleader, crooner, comic, and m.c. of my family's mountainside resort hotel. When he is not trussed up in the elasticized muscleman's swim trunks which he dons to conduct rumba lessons by the side of the pool, he is dressed to kill, generally in his two-tone crimson and cream-colored "loafer" jacket and the wide canary-yellow trousers that taper down to enchain him just above his white, perforated, sharpie's shoes. A fresh slice of Black Jack gum is at the ready in his pocket while another is being savored, with slow-motion sassiness, in what my mother derisively describes as Herbie's "yap." Below the stylishly narrow alligator belt and the gold droop of key chain, one knee works away inside his trousers, Herbie keeping time to hides he alone hears being beaten in that Congo called his brain. Our brochure (from fourth grade on composed by me, in collaboration with the owner) headlines Herbie as "our Jewish Cugat, our Jewish Krupa—all rolled into one!"; further on he is described as "a second Danny

Kaye," and, in conclusion, just so that everyone understands that this 140-pound twenty-year-old is not nobody and Kepesh's Hungarian Royale is not *exactly* nowhere, as "another Tony Martin."

Our guests appear to be nearly as mesmerized by Herbie's shameless exhibitionism as I am. A newcomer will have barely settled into a varnished wicker rocker on the veranda before one of the old-timers arrived from the hot city the previous week starts giving him the lowdown on this wonder of our tribe. "And wait till you see the tan on this kid. He's just got that kind of skin—never burns, only tans. And from the first day in the sun. This kid has got skin on him right out of Bible times."

Because of a damaged eardrum, our drawing card—as it pleases Herbie to call himself, particularly into the teeth of my mother's disapproval—is with us throughout the Second World War. Ongoing discussion from the rocking chairs and the card tables as to whether the disability is congenital or self-inflicted. The suggestion that something other than Mother Nature might have rendered Herbie unfit to fight Tojo, Mussolini, and Hitler—well, I am outraged, personally mortified by the very idea. Yet, how tantalizing to imagine Herbie taking a hatpin or a toothpick in his own hands—taking an ice pick!—and deliberately mutilating himself in order to outfox his draft board.

"I wouldn't put it past him," says guest A-owitz; "I wouldn't put anything past that operator. What a pistol he is!" "Come on, he did no such thing. That kid is a patriotic kid like anybody else. I'll tell you how he went half deaf like that, and ask the doctor here if I'm not right: from banging on those drums," says guest B-owitz. "Oh,

can that kid play drums," says C-owitz; "you could put him on the stage of the Roxy right now—and I think the only reason he ain't is that, like you say, he doesn't hear right from the drums themselves." "Still," says D-owitz, "he don't say definitely yes or no whether he did it with some instrument or something." "But that's the showman in him, keeping you hanging by suspense. His whole stock-in-trade is that he's crazy enough for anything—that's his whole *act.*" "Still, even to kid around about it don't strike me right. The Jewish people have got their hands full as it is." "Please, a kid who dresses like that right down to the key chain, and with a build like that that he works on day and night, plus those drums, you think he is gonna do himself serious physical damage just out of spite to the war effort?" "I agree, one hundred percent. Gin, by the way." "Oh, you caught me with my pants down, you s.o.b. What the hell am I holding these jacks for, will somebody tell me? Look, you know what you don't find? You don't find a kid who is good-looking like this one, who is funny like he is too. To take that kind of looks, and to be funny, and to go crazy like that with the drums, that to me is something special in the annals of show business." "And what about at the pool? How about on the diving board? If Billy Rose laid eyes on him, clowning around in the water like that, he'd be in the Aquacade tomorrow." "And what about that voice on him?" "If only he wouldn't kid *around* with it—if only he would sing *serious.*" "If that kid sang serious he could be in the Metropolitan Opera." "If he sang serious, he could be a cantor, for Christ sakes, with no problem. He could break your heart. Just imagine for yourself what he would look like in a white tallis with that tan!" And here at last I am

spotted, working on a model R.A.F. Spitfire down at the end of the veranda rail. "Hey, little Kepesh, come here, you little eavesdropper. Who do you want to be like when you grow up? Listen to this—stop shuffling the cards a minute. Who's your hero, Kepaleh?"

I don't have to think twice, or at all. "Herbie," I reply, much to the amusement of the men in the congregation. Only the mothers look a little dismayed.

Yet, ladies, who else could it be? Who else is so richly endowed as to be able to mimic Cugie's accent, the shofar blowing, and, at my request, a fighter plane nose-diving over Berchtesgaden—*and* the Fuehrer going crazy underneath? Herbie's enthusiasm and virtuosity are such that my father must sometimes caution him to keep certain of his imitations to himself, unique though they may be. "But," protests Herbie, "my fart is perfect." "Could be, for all I know," replies the boss, "but not in front of a mixed crowd." "But I've been working on it for months. Listen!" "Oh, spare me, Bratasky, please. It just ain't exactly what a nice tired guest wants to hear in a casino after his dinner. You can appreciate that, can't you? Or can't you? I don't get you sometimes, where your brain is. Don't you realize that these are people who keep kosher? Don't you get it about women and children? My friend, it's simple—the shofar is for the High Holidays and the other stuff is for the toilet. Period, Herbie. Finished."

So he comes to imitate for me, his awestruck acolyte, the toots and the tattoos that are forbidden him in public by my Mosaic dad. It turns out that not only can he simulate the panoply of sounds—ranging from the faintest springtime sough to the twenty-one-gun salute—with which mankind emits its gases, but he can also "do

diarrhea." Not, he is quick to inform me, some poor shlimazel in its throes—that he had already mastered back in high school—but the full Wagnerian strains of fecal *Sturm und Drang.* "I could be in Ripley's," he tells me. "You read Ripley's, don't you—then judge for yourself!" I hear the rasp of a zipper being undone. Then a most enviable stream belting an enamel bowl. Next the whoosh of the flush, followed by the gargle and hiccup of a reluctant tap commencing to percolate. And all of it emanating from Herbie's mouth.

I could fall down and worship at his feet.

"And catch *this!*" This is two hands soaping one another—but seemingly in Herbie's mouth. "All winter long I would go into the toilet at the Automat and just sit there and listen." "You would?" "Sure. I listen even to my own self every single time I go to the can." "You do?" "But your old man, he's the expert, and to him it's only one thing—dirty! 'Period!' " adds Herbie, and in a voice exactly like my old man's!

And he means every word he says. How come, I wonder. How can Herbie know so much and care so passionately about the tintinnabulations of the can? And why do tone-deaf philistines like my father care so little?

So it seems in summer, while I am under the demon drummer's spell. Then Yom Kippur comes and Bratasky goes, and what good does it do me to have learned what someone like that has to teach a growing boy? Our -witzes, -bergs, and -steins are dispersed overnight to regions as remote to me as Babylon—Hanging Gardens called Pelham and Queens and Hackensack—and the local terrain is reclaimed by the natives who till the fields, milk the cows, keep the stores, and work year round for

the county and the state. I am one of two Jewish children in a class of twenty-five, and a feel for the rules and preferences of society (as ingrained in me, it seems, as susceptibility to the feverish, the flamboyant, the bizarre) dictates that, regardless of how tempted I may be to light my fuse and show these hicks a few of Herbie's fireworks, I do not distinguish myself from my schoolmates by anything other than grades. To do otherwise, I realize—and without my father even having to remind me—will get me nowhere. And nowhere is not where I am expected to go.

So, like a boy on a calendar illustration, I trudge nearly two miles through billowing snowdrifts down our mountain road to the school where I spend my winters excelling, while far to the south, in that biggest of cities, where anything goes, Herbie (who sells linoleum for an uncle during the day and plays with a Latin American combo on weekends) strives to perfect the last of his lavatory impressions. He writes of his progress in a letter that I carry hidden away in the button-down back pocket of my knickers and reread every chance I get; aside from birthday cards and stamp "approvals," it is the only piece of mail I have ever received. Of course I am terrified that if I should drown while ice skating or break my neck while sledding, the envelope postmarked BROOKLYN, NY will be found by one of my schoolmates, and they will all stand around my corpse holding their noses. My mother and father will be shamed forever. The Hungarian Royale will lose its good name and go bankrupt. Probably I will not be allowed to be buried within the cemetery walls with the other Jews. And all because of what Herbie dares to write down on a piece of paper and then mail through a

government post office to a nine-year-old child, who is imagined by his world (and thus by himself) to be pure. Does Bratasky really fail to understand how decent people feel about such things? Doesn't he know that even sending a letter like this he is probably breaking a law, and making of me an accomplice? But if so, why do I persist in carrying the incriminating document around with me all day long? It is in my pocket even while I am on my feet battling for first place in the weekly spelling bee against the other finalist, my curly-haired co-religionist and the concert-pianist-to-be, brilliant Madeline Levine; it is in my pajama pocket at night, to be read by flashlight beneath the covers, and then to sleep with, next to my heart. "I am really getting down to a science how it sounds when you pull the paper off the roller. Which about gives me the whole shmeer, kid. Herbert L. Bratasky *and nobody else in the world* can now do taking a leak, taking a crap, diarrhea—*and* unrolling the paper itself. That leaves me just one mountain to climb—wiping!"

By the time I am eighteen and a freshman at Syracuse, my penchant for mimicry very nearly equals my mentor's, only instead of imitations à la Bratasky, I do Bratasky, the guests, and the characters on the staff. I impersonate our tuxedoed Rumanian headwaiter putting on the dog in the dining room—"This way, please, Monsieur Kornfeld . . . Madame, more derma?"—then, back in the kitchen, threatening in the coarsest Yiddish to strangle the drunken chef. I impersonate our Gentiles, the gawky handyman George, shyly observing the ladies' poolside rumba class, and Big Bud, the aging muscular lifeguard (and grounds attendant) who smoothly hustles the vacationing housewife, and then, if he can, her nubile offspring

sunning her new nose job. I even do a long dialogue (tragical-comical-historical-pastoral) of my exhausted parents undressing for bed the night after the close of the season. To find that the most ordinary events out of my former life are considered by others to be so *entertaining* somewhat astonishes me—also I am startled at first to discover that not everybody seems to have enjoyed formative years so densely populated with vivid types. Nor had I begun to imagine that I was quite so vivid myself.

In my first few semesters at college I am awarded leading roles in university productions of plays by Giraudoux, Sophocles, and Congreve. I appear in a musical comedy, singing, and even dancing, in my fashion. There seems to be nothing I cannot do on a stage—there would seem to be nothing that can keep me *off* the stage. At the beginning of my sophomore year, my parents visit school to see me play Tiresias—older, as I interpret the role, than the two of them together—and afterward, at the opening-night party, they watch uneasily as I respond to a request from the cast to entertain with an imitation of the princely rabbi with the perfect diction who annually comes "all the way" from Poughkeepsie to conduct High Holiday services in the casino of the hotel. The following morning I show them around the campus. On the path to the library several students compliment me on my staggering rendition of old age the night before. Impressed—but reminding me also, with a touch of her irony, that not so long ago the stage star's diapers were hers to change and wash—my mother says, "Everybody knows you already, you're famous," while my father, struggling with disappointment, asks yet again, "And

medical school is out?" Whereupon I tell him for the tenth time—*telling* him it's the tenth time—"I want to act," and believe as much myself, until that day when all at once performing, in my fashion, seems to me the most pointless, ephemeral, and pathetically self-aggrandizing of pursuits. Savagely I turn upon myself for allowing everyone, indeed, to know me already, to glimpse the depths of mindless vanity that the confines of the nest and the strictures of the sticks had previously prevented me from exposing, even to myself. I am so humiliated by the nakedness of what I have been up to that I consider transferring to another school, where I can start out afresh, untainted in the eyes of others by egomaniacal cravings for spotlight and applause.

Months follow in which I adopt a penitential new goal for myself every other week. I *will* go to medical school—and train to be a surgeon. Though perhaps as a psychiatrist I can do even more good for mankind. I will become a lawyer . . . a diplomat . . . why *not* a rabbi, one who is studious, contemplative, *deep* . . . I read *I and Thou* and the Hasidic tales, and home on vacation question my parents about the family's history in the old country. But as it is over fifty years since my grandparents emigrated to America, and as they are dead and their children by and large without any but the most sentimental interest in our origins in mid-Europe, in time I give up the inquiry, and the rabbinical fantasy with it. Though not the effort to ground myself in what is substantial. It is still with the utmost self-disgust that I remember my decrepitude in *Oedipus Rex*, my impish charm in *Finian's Rainbow*—all that cloying *acting!* Enough frivolity and

manic showing off! At twenty I must stop impersonating others and Become Myself, or at least begin to impersonate the self I believe I ought now to be.

He—the next me—turns out to be a sober, solitary, rather refined young man devoted to European literature and languages. My fellow actors are amused by the way in which I abandon the stage and retreat into a rooming house, taking with me as companions those great writers whom I choose to call, as an undergraduate, "the architects of my mind." "Yes, David has left the world," my drama society rival is reported to be saying, "to become a man of the cloth." Well, I have my airs, and the power, apparently, to dramatize myself and my choices, but above all it is that I am an absolutist—a *young* absolutist—and know no way to shed a skin other than by inserting the scalpel and lacerating myself from end to end. I am one thing or I am the other. Thus, at twenty, do I set out to undo the contradictions and overleap the uncertainties.

During my remaining years at college I live somewhat as I had during my boyhood winters, when the hotel was shut down and I read hundreds of library books through hundreds of snowstorms. The work of repairing and refurbishing goes on daily throughout the Arctic months—I hear the sound of the tire chains nicking at the plowed roadways, I hear planks dropping off the pickup truck into the snow, and the simple inspiring noises of the hammer and the saw. Beyond the snow-caked sill I see George driving down with Big Bud to fix the cabanas by the covered pool. I wave my arm, George blows the horn . . . and to me it is as though the Kepeshes are now three animals in